23.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED JUNE 14, 1820,

AT THE

ORDINATION

OF THE

REV. IRA INGRAHAM,

AS

PASTOR OF A CHURCH

IN

ORWELL.

BY JOSHUA BATES, D. D.
President of Middlebury College.

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NOTICE.

This Sermon was likewise preached at the ordination of the Rev. CHARLES Y. CHASE, in Corinth.

SERMON.

ISAIAH VIII. 20.

To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

Man has been denominated a religious animal. In a loose sense of the term, *religious*, the definition is not indeed improper. For a propensity, to seek some object of veneration and worship, is common to all mankind. At least the fact is so well established by history and observation, that we may safely consider this propensity, a part of the human constitution—a universal law of our nature.

Observation likewise establishes the fact, that this propensity, to acknowledge the authority, to fear the displeasure, and regard the will of some Superior Power, distinguishes man from every other class of animals, which inhabit our globe. We may add, in nothing else is the distinction between man and beast so clearly and strongly marked.—Reason, indeed, is a boasted prerogative of man; but, in its lower forms and particular exercises, it is not far removed from the operations and results of that property in beasts and birds, which we usually denominate instinct. Many of them unquestionably possess several faculties, which closely resemble the powers of the human mind. They can perceive; they can remember; they can compare individual objects of perception, and distinguish them from each other; they can even draw direct inferences from simple facts. It is true, they seem not to possess the power of abstracting and combining ideas, so as to learn the use of general signs, to form general propositions, to discover general truths, and establish general principles; and this comparative deficiency in them may justify us, in applying to man the discriminating appellation of *rational*. But after all, it is a distinction, marked with less clearness and precision, than that,

which is founded on the universal religious propensity of the human species.

The propensity of which we speak, however, is a blind propensity; neither pointing out the proper object of religious homage, nor directing to the knowledge of duty and happiness. Such, indeed, is the blindness of the mind, through the hardness of the heart, in fallen man, that it seems to embrace errour rather than truth; and to delight in vanity and wickedness, rather than in righteousness of life. Hence the gross idolatry and debasing superstitions, which have overspread the earth. Hence the variety of objects, which men, in different ages and countries, have deified and adored. Hence, too, the various methods, which they have adopted, to conciliate the favor, and obtain the protection of the beings, whom they worshipped. They have truly made to themselves "gods many and lords many;" and by every species of sacrifice, of penance, of pomp and ceremony, and even of cruelty and licentiousness, have they endeavored to appease the wrath, and ensure the good will, of these imaginary deities. Nor have those, who possessed some knowledge of the true God, always sought a knowledge of his will by such means and with such views, as to learn their duty and secure his favour. Even the *Children of Israel*, who were favoured with peculiar manifestations of the divine presence and glory, and distinguished from other nations of antiquity, by the possession of a written revelation, often relapsed into idolatry; and, instead of regarding the messages of Heaven, resorted for instruction to impostors and false prophets. For this perversness, in the time of Isaiah, they were reproved in the language of our text and the preceding verse:— "And when they shall say unto you, seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards, that peep and mutter; should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead? *To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*"

Without spending time to give a particular exposition of the text, or attempting to prove, as some commentators have suggested, that the term *law* may denote the preceptive part, and

the term *testimony* the doctrinal part, of the Bible; we simply observe, that these two terms, in the text, evidently comprehend that portion of the inspired word, which had been given to the church, before the time of our prophet. We may add, the direction contained in the text, and the principles, which it involves, are strictly applicable to the whole system of divine revelation. With this general exposition in view, we may thus paraphrase our text: *To the law and to the testimony*—to the sacred scriptures must you repair for all safe and conclusive instructions, on the subject of religion. They constitute the only complete and unerring standard of truth and duty. In their decisions implicit confidence may be placed. On the doctrines, which they teach, should our faith be built. By the precepts, which they contain, should our conduct be regulated. According to the pattern of moral excellence, which they exhibit, should our characters be formed. By their decisions, therefore, let the religious instructions of every man be tried. Those, who preach according to these oracles of God, are faithful messengers of truth; let them be received. But, if any *speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in in them*—their instructions are without authority—they communicate no spiritual light—they are false prophets; let them be rejected. The doctrine of our text, then, reduced to a single proposition, may be thus briefly stated:

THE SCRIPTURES ARE OUR ONLY SURE GUIDE TO RELIGIOUS TRUTH AND DUTY.

The proof and illustration of this proposition cannot fail to be interesting to those, who have the Bible in their hands. Nor will the practical reflections, which it suggests, be unappropriate to the solemnities of the occasion.—I shall treat of the subject under two general heads of discourse; the *first* embracing the negative, and the *second* the positive part of the proposition.

I. *All other guides in religion, except the Scriptures, are erroneous or deficient.*—In order to establish this position, however, it cannot be necessary, in this enlightened age and country, to examine the claims of the various pretended revelations, which have made their appearance in the world. The noted Sibyl-

line Oracles, beside their equivocal meaning, were local and temporary in their application. Nor is it even probable, that the verses, extant under this title, are the genuine production of antiquity. The Koran of Mahomet, in addition to its cruel and licentious character, was published under the point of the sword; and its authority has been supported solely by ignorance and arbitrary power. Though the same cannot be said, concerning the Veda and Shasters of Hindostan; yet very little more can be said in their favour. Indeed an entire deficiency of well attested miracles and evidently accomplished prophecies—the only infallible proofs of divine revelation, is common to all the pretended revelations, by which the rites of ancient and modern Paganism have been maintained in the world. We may, therefore dismiss the consideration of their claims, at once; without any apprehension, that they possess the least authority, with a single person in this land of light and liberty—without any fear of beholding, among us, the licentious groves of Baal, or the bloody car of Juggernaut.

Other guides, however, if not equally absurd, yet equally unsafe and insufficient, as the oracles of Paganism or the impositions of Mahometanism, have been followed, and are still followed by multitudes, even in christian countries.

1. Among these insufficient guides we may reckon natural *Conscience*. Some have professed to wish for no other guide. They rely on what they call the dictates of conscience, for the regulation of all their conduct. That there is in man such a thing as conscience, will not be denied. But is it a safe moral and religious guide? Is it able to discover truth? Can it distinguish between right and wrong? May it not be defiled, perverted, and even seared, as with a hot iron? Are not its supposed dictates often confounded with the impulses of passion, or the stimulants of appetite—with the suggestions of a corrupt heart, or the decisions of a perverse will? Does it not sometimes cease entirely to perform its office, and leave men to practise the grossest wickedness without remorse? What, indeed, is its appropriate office? Certainly it is not, to make known the will of God, and point out the path of duty. The decisions

of conscience, in its most perfect state, are coincident with the judgment. They cannot, indeed, be distinguished from that habitual and instantaneous judgment, which a man forms of his own conduct, in view of some rule of action; and the reproaches of conscience are nothing more, than the feeling, which follows this judgment, when such a rule has been violated—nothing more, than the anticipation of the sentence of some real or imaginary tribunal. Your conscience, therefore, will be good or bad; and will guide you right or wrong, according to the nature of the standard, to which you refer your actions. If conscience were a safe guide in life; or, in other words, if every man possessed a moral sense, discriminating good from evil, without the aid of rule or instruction, all men would instinctively approve or condemn the same actions; and what is esteemed praise worthy, in one age and country, would not be condemned as vile in another. But nothing, like uniformity of feeling and opinion on this subject, has ever existed among men. How various—how contradictory, have been the moral sentiments of different ages, of different nations in the same age, and even of different individuals in the same nation! What one has approved and encouraged, another has discountenanced and condemned; what one has viewed with satisfaction and delight, another has contemplated with abhorrence; what one has prescribed as the service of God, another has represented as that accursed thing, which the Lord hateth. The truth is, conscience is formed by education, by the power of habit, by the influence of passion, by the authority of example; in a word, by every thing, which can affect the opinions, the hopes, or the fears of man. So far, therefore, from being a safe guide to religious truth and duty, it depends directly on our previously established views of truth and duty, for all its operations.—Conscience should, indeed, be regarded; but it should first be enlightened and purified. Unenlightened and unsanctified, it may perhaps occasionally speak; but its voice will be indistinct, and its language equivocal, like the uncertain sound of the trumpet, by which no one is warned to prepare for battle. In no case does it supersede the necessity of reli-

gious instruction. To those who follow it, without regard to the instructions of the inspired word, it will prove a deceitful guide; leading them into the mazes of errour, and leaving them to perish in darkness.

2. Human *Reason* is another insufficient, and often erroneous guide. There are some, who consider unenlightened conscience as a blind guide; and discard the doctrine, which teaches submission to the mere impulse of feeling; who, nevertheless, close their eyes against the light of revelation, and blindly follow what they choose to call the dictates of reason. With them philosophy is every thing; and, in their opinion, it is insufficient to enlighten and reform the world—to discover the will of God, and lead men to happiness. Reason, indeed, has its proper place, in the investigation of religious truth and duty; and, without it, revelation would be unintelligible and useless. Still however, it is insufficient alone;—unaided by revelation, it is altogether insufficient, to lead us to a knowledge of the divine will, on which our duty, our destination, and our happiness depend. Even in its investigation of facts, on which all the inductions of sound philosophy are built, it is tied down to the earth, and restrained within the narrow limits of the present life. It cannot advance a step beyond the grave. It leaves all futurity involved in darkness. From it, eternity, with all its interesting scenes and animating hopes, is concealed by an impenetrable vail. Concerning a life to come, and the necessary preparations for happiness in that life, it can give us no satisfactory information. It may, indeed, form conjectures, and suggest imaginations; but they will be vain and unprofitable—doubt and uncertainty will rest upon them, destroying all the consolation of hope, and leaving nothing of the energy of holy principle.—Without the aid of revelation, what can reason do—what has it done, in the cause of religion? The experiment has been tried; and the result is known. The history of the world accords with the decision of an inspired apostle: "The world by wisdom knew not God." However consistent with reason, the great doctrines of the gospel may appear, reason never would have discovered them—cer-

tainly never would have embraced them with confidence, and applied them to practical purposes. The history of ancient philosophy and modern infidelity fully establishes this position; and proves, beyond the possibility of doubt, the insufficiency of unenlightened reason, to lead us into truth. This bewildering guide has led some to atheism; some to polytheism; some to idolatry; and all, who have pretended to follow it, to alternate carelessness and fearful apprehensions—to absurd conjectures and bewildering skepticism—to licentiousness of principle and instability of character.

Let not these remarks be misapprehended. I would not undervalue the gift of reason. It is the first, the noblest gift of Heaven to man. Nor would I deny its importance, and even necessity, in the investigation of religious truth. Christianity does not disclaim it. On the contrary she addresses men, as rational beings; and calls upon them to judge and act, like rational beings. Indeed, true religion and sober reason can never be inconsistent with each other. Proceeding from the same perfect Being, they can never counteract each other's influence. Religion even requires the noblest, the purest exercise of reason; and the homage, which it demands, is sanctioned by the soundest maxims of philosophy. It is true, *science falsely so called*, or that superficial philosophy, which inflates the mind with vanity and pride, is always opposed to religion; and it naturally holds the doctrines and the disciples of Christ in contempt. But sound philosophy, well established science, sanctified reason, is the friend and companion of pure religion. In the words of Bacon, that father of inductive reasoning and correct philosophy, I may add; "A thorough insight into philosophy makes a good believer; and a smattering in it naturally produces such a race of despicable infidels, as the little profligate writers of the present age."

3. Others pretend to be guided by inward and *Supernatural Light*—by instruction communicated directly from Heaven; or, in other words, to derive their knowledge of truth and duty from the suggestions of the Holy Spirit to their minds, independently of the Scriptures.—Now, to say the least, such per-

sons are liable to self-deception, and destitute of any just claim to the confidence of others. I would by no means be understood to deny the possibility or reality of inspiration. God is able to speak to men, and commission them to speak with authority to their fellow men. Indeed, one object of this discourse is to prove, that holy men of old did speak, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. But the occasions on which they spoke; and the messages which they delivered, were sufficiently solemn and important, to justify the interposition of Heaven; and what distinguishes their claims, to be heard and regarded, from the pretensions of impostors and the presumption of fanaticks, is, that their inspiration was accompanied with supernatural gifts, and attested by the display of miraculous power. But all pretensions to inspiration, without this evidence of the fact, are destitute of the seal of Heaven. They may be the dreams of enthusiasm, or the subtle contrivances of imposture. They may proceed from a heated imagination, or from the cold calculations of hypocrisy. Nothing, therefore can justify a moment's attention to those, who come to us under pretence of bringing a new revelation—a direct message from Heaven; but the possession of supernatural gifts, and the exercise of miraculous power. And this criterion will authorize us to reject, at once, all pretenders to inspiration, who have arisen, since the canon of scripture was closed; from the false prophet of Mecca to the lowest and most obscure among the fanaticks and hypocrites of later times.—Indeed, the Scriptures, the inspiration of which, as we shall prove in the sequel of this discourse, is fully established by the evidence of miracles, seem to forbid the expectation of any new revelation from Heaven. They are declared to be sufficient, to answer all the purposes, for which a revelation is given to man; and a woe is even pronounced upon the man, who shall presumptuously attempt to add to the sacred word.

We would not, however, be understood to deny the enlightning and sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, we contend, with an apostle, that "the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned." Both the conversion of sin-

ners and the sanctification of saints are the appropriate works of the Spirit of God. But how does the Spirit operate, to produce these effects? Not in opposition to the instructions of the Bible; not even without the aid of this great instrument of salvation. Those, who are *born again*, are begotten through the gospel—are born of the incorruptible seed of the word—are sanctified through the truth. The Lord, by his Spirit, opens the heart of every believer, to receive the truth; but the truth, thus received, is not a new revelation; it is the truth already revealed; it is the spiritual meaning of the inspired word. By the standard of the Scriptures, therefore, every impression on the heart, and every suggestion to the mind, must be tried. To regard any supposed operations of the Spirit, without first bringing these operations to the test of the Scriptures, is fanaticism; it has ever proved a fruitful source of errour; it naturally leads to extravagance and wickedness; it will end in madness and ruin. Without reference to the criterion, which the Scriptures furnish, how can we determine, whether the impressions, which we feel, are from above, or beneath—the operations of the spirit of truth, or of errour—the suggestions of the Holy Ghost, or of the spirit, which worketh in the children of disobedience? Evil spirits find easy access to the corrupt heart and darkened understanding of fallen man. Our great adversary goeth about, like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; and, to effect his purpose, he can even assume the appearance of an angle of light. Hence the importance of the apostolick direction; "Try the spirits, whether they are of God;" and hence the great practical use of our text; "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

Having thus considered the negative part of our general proposition, and attempted to show, that all other guides in religion, except the Scriptures, are erroneous or deficient; we proceed to the positive part; and observe,

II. *That the Scriptures are a sure guide to religious truth and duty.*—In order to establish this position, it will be requisite to prove, that they constitute an authoratitive record of doc-

trines and precepts, taught by God himself; that these doctrines and precepts are adequate to the exigencies of mankind; and that the manner, in which they are taught, is adapted to the common and universal powers and capacities of the human mind.—All the considerations, which go to establish these points, cannot be adduced in a single discourse. Only a very brief and general view of the evidence, in support of each, according to the preceding order, will be attempted.

1. *The Scriptures constitute an authoratitive record of doctrines and precepts, taught by God himself;* besause those men, who wrote them, were moved to do it by the Holy Spirit.—The evidence which proves, that the historical books of the New Testament were written by some of the apostles of Christ and their companions in labour, is conclusive—abundantly sufficient, to satisfy every ingenuous mind. Quotations from them are found in a succession of writers, from the days of the apostles to the present time. They have, likewise, been read and expounded in christian assemblies, through this succession of ages. We may add, in the language of Paley; "Commentaries were early written upon them, harmonies formed out of them; different copies collected, and versions of them made into different languages." There can be no doubt, therefore, antecedently to the proof of their inspiration, that they contain a correct statement of facts—a true account of what the apostles preached and testified concerning the life, and doctrines, and miracles, and death, and resurrection of Christ. If then, the four *Gospels* and the *Acts* contain a true account of what the apostles taught concerning Christ, it follows with moral certainty, that the account itself is true. For they were so situated, and the number and nature of the facts related by them were such, that they could not be deceived; and they must have acted against all those motives, which usually influence the human mind, to have attempted to deceive others, in a case, which exposed them to trials and sufferings, persecution and death. Nothing, but a conviction of the truth and importance of their testimony, could have induced them to give it, in circumstances of such imminent danger. Beside, it would have been utterly impossible,

to have imposed such an account of miracles and alleged public facts upon those, to whom they appealed, if the account had not been substantially true.

Now this concise view of the evidencies of the historical books of the New Testament, prepares the way to prove the plenary inspiration of the whole. For if the substance of the account, which they contain, is true, (and to those, who will examine the historical evidences, in detail, not a doubt can remain on this point,) then it follows, that these same apostles and apostolick men were inspired, and wrote by inspiration—possessed supernatural gifts, and performed miraculous works; for all this is declared in these books themselves, and constitutes an inseparable part of the account.

I might proceed to adduce, from these writings, instances, in which the apostles claimed, to speak with the authority of inspiration; and displayed supernatural gifts and miraculous powers, in justification of their claims. But these instances are so numerous, that they must be familiar to every reader of the Bible. The recorded promise of our Saviour on this subject, with the alleged accomplishment of the promise, will sufficiently illustrate the argument. It is recorded in the Gospels, that Christ promised to his disciples supernatural instruction, to prepare them for the great work of publishing and establishing his religion in the world. I have not time to bring together all the records of this promise. Two or three passages will be sufficient to remind you of others, perhaps equally pertinent.—"I have," said he to his disciples, "many things to say unto you; but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of truth is come, *he will guide you into all truth.*" Again he said to them; "The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, *he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said.*" With reference to this promised inspiration, the same authenticated records inform us, that, in his last personal interview with them, he said; "Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high." Accordingly we

are informed, that the apostles did remain at Jerusalem, till the day of Pentecost; when the promise was fulfilled, and its accomplisment attended with miraculous evidence; "For they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."—Now, if the apostles were neither deceived nor deceivers; or in other words, if the account, contained in the historical books of the New Testament, may be proved to be incontestibly true, antecedently to the consideration of their inspiration, then the records of this promise and of its accomplishment, with all the consequent display of supernatural gifts and miraculous powers by the apostles, are true likewise. For they are so interwoven with the general account, that they cannot be separated from it. Beside, the supposition of fiction here would be utterly inconsistent with the admission of historical truth, in the relation of the connected facts. But, if this promise was actually made to the apostles, and fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, then were they inspired; and spake and wrote, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Nor, considering the situation of Mark and Luke, and the miraculous conversion of Paul, can there be any objection to bringing them within the promise, and placing their claims to inspiration on the same ground, with the twelve immediate disciples.

I know, that this argument, in some of its branches, needs a more particular and full illustration; and, would the limits of this discourse permit, such an illustration might be easily furnished. But to my mind it is a conclusive argument; and I have no doubt, that it will produce conviction in the mind of every one, who cordially and carefully examines it.—We may, therefore, rest assured, that those apostles and apostolick men, who wrote the New Testament, were endued with a plenary inspiration of the Spirit of truth;—an inspiration, which brought to their remembrance all those things, which they had heard Christ say and seen him do, so far as Infinite Wisdom saw fit to publish them to the world; and which taught them all those additional truths, which the same Divine Wisdom intended to reveal by them;—an inspiration, which was sufficient to quicken

their memories and restrain them from errour, in relating facts, and to guide and instruct them, in revealing all the counsels of God, designed to regulate the faith and practice of mankind.

Sufficient proof of the inspiration of the Old Testament may be exhibited in a very few words: For the testimony of the inspired writers of the New Testament, on this point, is definite, full, and incontrovertible. With direct reference to the Old Testament, all the books of which had been collected, canonized, and translated into the Greek language, long before the Christian era, an apostle declares; "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." Again, with evident allusion to the production of the same books, he says; "Holy men spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." We may add, that the books of the Old Testament are often quoted, and referred to, collectively and separately, by the inspired writers of the New Testament; and always with reverence and evident respect for them, as possessing divine authority.

Other arguments for the inspiration of the Scriptures, beside this founded on the claims of the writers, accompanied with the display of miraculous power, might be adduced. I might exhibit the evidence, arising from their general harmony, and agreement, in the relation of facts. I might state the argument, founded on the accomplishment of prophecies, contained in them. —I might speak of the consistency and excellency of their instructions, compared with the highest efforts and best productions of human ingenuity. I might show their direct tendency to reform the world; and their happy effects, where they have been received with faith, and regarded with reverence. I might, finally, appeal to the experience of every christian, for a species of evidence, which the carnal mind cannot perceive; but which every pious man finds in the wonderful adaptation of the consolations and instructions of the Scriptures to his own trials and character—a species of evidence, which depends neither on learning nor sagacity of mind; but on the correspondence of sanctified affections with the exhibitions of wisdom and holiness in the word—a species of evidence, by which the spiritual mind discerns the seal of truth on every page of the

Holy Bible,—a species of evidence, more satisfactory to the experienced and advanced christian, than all possible external proofs combined—a species of evidence, which grows with the christian's growth in grace, and strengthens with his strenght in virtue—a species of evidence, in short, which the shafts of the scoffer cannot reach, nor the ingenuity of the infidel undermine.

But I have not time to enlarge on these topicks; nor is it necessary for the particular purposes of this discourse. I must, however, ask your patient attention, while I endeavour to answer such inquiries, as may seem to grow out of my principal argument for the inspiration of the Scriptures.

It may be asked, how we know, that the books of the New Testament are the genuine productions of those inspired men, to whom they are ascribed? We answer, that, in most cases, the historical evidence is complete; and, in all, satisfactory. They were generally received by primitive Christians, who possessed the means of knowing their origin, as not only authentick, but genuine. They have too been read and expounded in christian assemblies, from the apostolick age; and, with a few exceptions, have been viewed by successive generations, as the genuine productions of the alleged writers. Beside, many of them bear internal marks of their genuineness, as well as of their inspiration. For instance, a comparison of particular passages, in "The Acts of the Apostles," with particular allusions and incidental remarks, in the Epistles ascribed to St. Paul, will furnish proof little short of demonstration, that these Epistles were written by that apostle of the Gentiles.

It may be asked again, how we ascertain, that these books have been preserved, free from important interpolations and essential alterations? To this inquiry our answer is; that a recurrence to ancient manuscripts and ancient versions of them, as well as to the numerous quotations from them, made by early christian writers, shows conclusively, that no such alterations have been made in the sacred text, as to affect the great system of revealed truth; and that these books remain substantially the same in the original language, as they came out of the hands of the apostles.—I know, much has recently been said of the

various readings of ancient manuscripts; and, without a continual miracle, it could not have been possible to secure the numerous transcribers of the Scriptures from verbal errours.—Even, since the art of printing has been invented, we know that verbal errours have crept into many editions of the Bible. After all, these various readings of ancient manuscripts, though numerous, are less important, than might have been expected; and we may affirm with assurance, that those who are unable to examine for themselves and determine the question of amending the commonly received text, are in no danger of essential errour from this cause, either in matters of faith or practice. You may substitute any of the various readings, collected by the learned and indefatigable Griesbach, without finding occasion to alter your opinion, concerning a single important doctrine or precept of the Gospel. The sense of some comparatively unimportant passages might be varied; and a few proof-passages of particular doctrines might be taken away; but the remaining proofs would be amply sufficient, to satisfy every humble and candid mind. The experiment has been made, and I am able to bear testimony to the result.

It may be asked, once more, how a merely English reader can be certain, that our common translation of the Bible faithfully exhibits the meaning of the original? We answer, that he may have the strongest possible assurance of the learning and fidelity of the translators, from the concurrent testimony of learned men of all denominations. This translation was made by forty-seven of the most learned men, who could be selected in the reign of king James.* It was made in an age, compartively free from doctrinal controversy; and in circumstances, the most favourable to impartiality and fidelity.—It is true, that a few words and phrases, in our translation have become obsolete; and a few others have passed through some change of signification. It is true, likewise, that a knowledge of the original languages of the Scriptures may sometimes give us a clearer conception of the import of a passage; may thus serve to aid us, in explaining an obscurity, or removing an objection;

*See the Note at the end of this discourse.

and may, therefore, be considered, as an important qualification for religious teachers, who should be able not only to instruct the humble inquirer after truth, but to convince or silence gainsayers. Yet to a right understanding of the doctrines and duties of Christianity, the English reader possesses every necessary advantage. He is certainly in no danger of falling into unavoidable errour, through his ignorance of the original languages. With the English Bible in his hand, he stands, if not on equal ground with the learned critick; yet on ground sufficiently elevated, to give him a view of the whole field of revealed truth, and enable him to trace the path of heavenly wisdom, from its commencement to its termination in the regions of unclouded light and uninterrupted felicity. He may, therefore, safely and firmly reject all the doctrines and commandments of men, which do not accord with the instructions of these oracles of God. *To this law and testimony,* he may repair with confidence; and rest assured, that *if any do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*

2. Our second particular remark in support of the general position, that the Scriptures are a sure guide to religious truth and duty, is, that *the doctrines and precepts, which they contain, are adequate to the exigencies of mankind;* or, in other words, that they afford us all desirable and practicable instruction on the subject of religion. It is true, curiosity may sometimes excite a desire, to look into the secret things of God, and examine the counsels of his infinite wisdom. But this is a vain curiosity; and the gratification of the desire is impracticable. Finite minds cannot comprehend subjects, which involve infinity. We cannot, by searching, find out God. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us. "It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?" But every thing concerning the divine character and government, which falls within the reach of the human mind, and which could be applied to the purposes of consolation and practice, is revealed to us in the Scriptures. Every thing, too, which concerns our own origin, nature, and destination, is taught us; so far as this instruction could excite our fears and raise our hopes, and thus

furnish us with the highest and most commanding motives of action.—It is true, likewise, that the Scriptures do not contain a particular precept for every individual act, nor for every modification of moral action. This would be impossible; and were it possible, it would be useless. But they do what is sufficient for the direction of all, who regard their authority—they lay down general rules, and establish general maxims of moral conduct, applicable to all men, of all ages, in every condition of life. These rules and maxims, which are always salutary and abundantly sufficient to answer every question of casuistry, they illustrate by supposed cases, or by examples of real life; and in such a plain and familiar manner, as to be easily understood and readily applied by all, who wish to form their characters according to this perfect model.

3. Thus are we naturally brought to our third and last particular observation, in support of our second general position: *The manner, in which the instructions of the Scriptures are communicated, is adapted to the common and universal powers and capacities of the human mind.* By this observation I do not mean to say, that there are no obscurities in the Bible; nor, that every portion of it is equally plain to all men, in every age of the Church. On the contrary, it is admitted, that the Scriptures contain, allusions to ancient customs, characters, and events, which necessarily create much obscurity; and often raise difficulties, not to be removed without critical inquiry and deep research into the antiquities of nations. Some parts of the inspired word, too, were obviously designed for the edification of the Church, at particular periods and in peculiar circumstances. Such were many of the precepts of the Mosaick law, which were given to guard the children of Israel against the idolatry of the Canaanites; which, of course, were temporary in their nature, and were completely abolished by the death of Christ. Such, likewise, are those portions of the prophetick writings; which are not yet fulfilled; and which were not intended to be definitely understood, till the predicted events should furnish the exposition. We may add; the Scriptures contain "meat for strong men and milk for babes"—instructions for the

new convert and for the advanced christian—a portion for every one in due season. But, after all, the great body of the sacred writings—the universal principles of inspiration—the doctrines, on which the christian's hopes rest, and by which motives to holy obedience are furnished; and the precepts, which are given to regulate his moral conduct and point out to him the path of duty and happiness, are all plain, and level to the capacity of every honest mind. Here the learned and illiterate stand on equal ground. The path of holiness is marked out by the finger of Heaven; and the clear light of the Sun of righteousness continually shines upon it. "The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein"—the humble inquirer after truth, though limited in human knowledge and intellectual capacity, may learn his duty, and find consolation—may understand every thing essential to sanctification and eternal salvation.

I should now proceed to close the discourse, with a practical application. But an apprehension, that an objection to the last remark may arise in some honest minds, induces me to solicit your patient attention, a few minutes more.—It may be asked; if the Scriptures are thus plain, and the great doctrines and duties of Christianity thus clearly taught and easy to be understood, how it should happen, that those, who call themselves christians, should be so much divided in opinion, on these subjects? The fact is indeed notorious, that, among nominal christians, there is a great diversity of opinions, on almost every point of doctrine and duty. The fact, I say, is undeniable; but the cause, it seems to me, is perfectly obvious. It does not arise from any deficiency of perspicuity in the instructions of the Bible; but from the different degrees of attention paid to it; and from the different views and feelings, with which it is read and expounded. Some, who pretend to believe the Scriptures, still pay little or no attention to them; neither reading themselves, nor attending on the preached word. Others, who do read the Bible, and perhaps often; still do it with wrong views and in an improper manner. They go to the Scriptures, not for the purpose of learning the will of God, not with a dis-

position to submit to their decisions; but to gratify a vain curiosity, with pre-conceived notions, in search for something to comfort them in sin; of course they misapply the promises, and misinterpret the plainest injunctions. The Bible is to them no better, than a sealed book.—In order to understand the Scriptures, we must read with faith, with attention, with interest—we must go to the Bible with a humble heart, a submissive will, and a teachable disposition—we must lay aside all prejudice, sacrifice every corrupt passion, and pray for the Spirit, to open our hearts, that we may receive the truth, and to give us a spiritual mind, that we may discern the things of the Spirit. Without these pre-requisites, the judgment will be biassed, and the Scriptures often perverted; and the want of these, without question, is the great cause of division among those, who bear the christian name. When all *nominal* christians shall become *real* christians, this difference in sentiment, especially on the leading doctrines and duties of christianity, will disappear; and the disciples of Christ will "be perfectly joined together, in the same mind and the same judgment."

But it may be asked farther, do not *real* christians now disagree in their religious opinions? To a superficial observer, there is, indeed, an appearance of great diversity of sentiment among those, whom christian charity embraces, as good men. But this diversity, upon examination, will be found only in appearance. Different names and different forms of worship have too long separated those, who substantially agree in the great doctrines and duties of religion. Hence their unity of sentiment has been concealed from the world, and often from themselves. But recent occurrences in the church have brought together those, who love the cause of the Redeemer; and proved, that they are not only of one heart, but of one mind. We might ask, indeed, could the result have been different? Where the christian character exists, must not the faith —the principles, on which that character is built, exist likewise? Can men agree in pious feeling and benevolent exertion; and yet disagree concerning those very truths, which excite this feeling and produce this exertion? No, the truth is,

that *pious* men of different denominations do not essentially differ in religious sentiment. Their views of the doctrines of the gospel are substantially the same; and, when these views are expressed with freedom and confidence, the agreement is readily discovered. No, the difference of religious sentiment is between men of different characters; and this difference is often as great, and as strongly marked among those, who are ranked under the same denomination, as among those, who are distinguished by the various ecclesiastical names of Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Episcopalian, &c. No, those, who go to the Bible, with humble and believing hearts, find the same doctrines taught, and the same duties inculcated; and, I may add, they are in no danger of fatal errour. No, it is the proud quibbler, the vain disputer, the thoughtless sinner, and the self-styled philosopher, who leans to his own understanding, and instead of submitting implicitly to the authority of Revelation and the decisions of the Scriptures, presumptuously undertakes to try the ways of God at the bar of human reason, and limit the divine operations according to the contracted views and selfish desires of fallen man;—these—these are the men, who find the Scriptures unintelligible—these are the men, to whom the Scriptures are a blind guide—these are the men, who under different denominations, and assuming various names, wrest the word of God to their own destruction; and, being blinded by a deceived heart, and given over to believe a lie, go down to the grave trusting to a refuge of lies.

My hearers, the practical lessons, which easily flow from our doctrine, are numerous and highly important; but the unusual length, to which this discourse has already been protracted, induces me to limit the application to those, which have a direct bearing on the solemnities of the occasion.

1. We learn from our subject the absurdity of attempting to reduce the doctrines of the gospel to the standard of human reason. If the Scriptures are a sure guide, then should they be implicitly followed; if they are given by inspiration of God then should their decisions be final and conclusive. We should open the Bible, with minds prepared to receive every truth,

which we find there taught. The mystery of a doctrine should not be permitted to operate, as an objection against it, for a single moment. We should remember, that "the thoughts of God are not, like our thoughts;" and that "he giveth not account unto man of his doings." What, therefore, God has declared, we should be ready to believe without controversy; and what he has commanded, we should be ready to do without gainsaying.—The office, and the whole office, of human reason in matters of revelation, is *first* to examine the evidence of its divine origin, and *secondly* to learn what it teaches. To suffer reason to proceed a step beyond this point, is to destroy the very use, and counteract the very design of revelation. It is the grossest absurdity. It is more; it is impious presumption; it is to deify reason; it is to substitute human judgment for divine wisdom.—Give me a Bible; convince me, that this Bible is the word of God; let me find a doctrine clearly and plainly taught in that word; and I ask no more. I embrace it, and I embrace it without hesitation; I love it, and I love it with all my heart. Whether it be, what reason could have discovered, or whether it be altogether beyond the researches of human intellect—whether the wisdom and benevolence of it can be fully comprehended by a finite understanding, or whether it involve a mystery, into which nothing but an Omniscient eye can look, is of no importance in the decision. It is enough for every humble and submissive mind, that it is a doctrine of revelation, and that this revelation is from God—that it is taught in the Scriptures, and that these Scriptures were given by divine inspiration—that it was spoken by holy men, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.—Indeed, without this teachable disposition —without this unreserved submission to the authority of revelation, of what use are the Scriptures! What can it avail us, that we have the Bible in our hands, if, after all, we refuse to submit to its decisions—if, after all, it must be made to bend to our reason, blinded as this reason naturally is by the depravity of the heart! If imperfect and short-sighted man—if every man, for himself, must try the ways of God by his ways and the thoughts of God by his thoughts—if the doctrines of the gospel

must be broughtto thetribunal of human reason, the Bible may as well be neglected, as read; it will become an unprofitable book; it will cease to instruct; it will prove a blind guide. Let us not, then, lean to our own un-derstandings. Let us go to the Scriptures with implicit confidence in their decisions. As new born babes, let us desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby.

2. We learn from our subject, who are to be received and regarded, as the true ministers of Christ.—Those, who preach according to the oracles of God—those, who faithfully declare his whole counsel, as revealed in the Scriptures, bear the messages of Heaven; their doctrines are true, and their instructions will have a salutary influence; let them be received. But, if any substitute the conjectures of their own minds, or the dreams of their own imaginations, for the sublime mysteries of the gospel, they are either fanaticks self-deceived, or hypocrites wickedly contriving to deceive others; let them be rejected. *To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*—In choosing a pastor and teacher, in examining a candidate for ordination, in forming an opinion of the character and tendency of any man's preaching, the Scriptures should be our criterion—the word of God our standard.

With the Church and Religious Society, in this place, we rejoice on this solemn and interesting occasion. We rejoice, men and brethren; because we hope, that you have made the word of God your criterion, in choosing a man to be set over you in the Lord. We rejoice; because we trust, that both you and this Ecclesiastical Council have applied this test with fidelity.

Brethren, we have great confidence in the man of your choice. We know him well; and we believe, that he will speak the truth in love—that he will preach the word, the uncorrupted word of God—that he will come to you in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.——Brethren, pray for him, that he may be faithful and successful—that he may prove a blessing to you and to your children—that the word of the Lord, at his mouth, may have free course, and be glorified.

3. We learn from our subject, where ministers are to look for their instructions. *To the law and the testimony* they should repair for the doctrines and directions, which they communicate to the people of their charge. They should preach, not themselves, but Christ Jesus. They should inculcate, not the commandments of men, but the lessons of heavenly wisdom. They should preach the word with simplicity, fidelity, and tenderness.—I would not, however, be understood to discountenance human learning, and the application of it to the purposes of the ministry. Nor would I discourage, in my brethren, a habit of attentive and general reading. But I would discountenance implicit confidence in the decisions of human productions. Though much assistance and satisfaction may be derived from the perusal of the writings of pious and learned men; yet it should never be forgotten, that there is no infallibility in man. We should call no man master. We should depend on the decisions of no human being. *To the law and to the testimony* of God we must ultimately repair, for all certain religious knowledge and unerring counsel. The Bible, compared with the best books of human composition, is like the fountain from a rock, compared with the turbid waters of the street. The word of God is perfect; the works of man always partake of the imperfection of human nature; and they not unfrequently confound the truths of God with the presumptuous conjectures of a darkened understanding, or the vain imaginations of a corrupt heart. While, therefore, ministers devote a portion of their time and attention to the productions of those, whom they esteem wise and good men; they should be careful, that they do not neglect the Book of God.—This suggestion is applicable, and on this occasion it should be peculiarly interesting, to the Candidate for ordination.

Dear Sir, you are about to appear, as an ambassadour of Christ, to this people.—The Bible is your commission. It contains all your instructions. The messages, which you are to deliver, you will find substantially in the Scriptures. You

will not, indeed, despise the aids of learning and eloquence, in executing the duties of your office. You will bring to the service of Christ all your acquisitions, and consecrate to him all your talents. But the Bible will not only be your text-book; but from it you will draw all your doctrines and exhortations.—Solemn, my brother, will be your charge; momentous your work; awful your responsibility! May the Lord give you grace, to be faithful; and grant you the happiness of a successful ministry! Long may you break to this people the bread of life; and having won many souls unto Christ, may you find them your crown of rejoicing in the day of the Lord. Amen.

NOTE.

The following brief history of the received Translation of the Bible, extracted from Ree's Cyclopædia, may be acceptable to those, who have not access to that work, or to Lewis' History of Translations.

"In 1604, the king commissioned fifty-four learned men of the two universities and other places, to confer together, so that nothing should pass without general consent, in order to make a new and more correct translation of the Bible. Such of these, as survived till the commencement of the work, were divided into six classes.* Ten were to meet at Westminster, and translate from the Pentateuch to the end of the second book of Kings. Eight, assembled at Cambridge, were to finish the rest of the historical books and the Hagiographa. At Oxford, seven were to undertake the four great prophets, with the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets. The epistles of Paul and the remaining canonical epistles were allotted to another company of seven at Westminster. Another company of eight, at Oxford, were to translate the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse. Lastly, another company of seven, at Cambridge, had assigned to them the Apochrypha, including the prayer of Manasseh. The king prescribed certain rules, mhich the translators were required carefully to observe."—"Every particular person of each company was to take the same chapter or chapters, and having separately translated his appropriate part, all were to meet, to compare what they had done, and to agree as to that which should remain; when any part was finished by the company, it was to be referred to the rest for their serious and judicious consideration; if any doubt or difference occurred, it was to be settled at a general meeting; with respect to places of special obscurity, the opinion of learned persons was to be obtained by letters addressed to them for this purpose; and skilful persons were requested to transmit any observations, that might be of use to the company, either at Westminster, Cambridge or Oxford."—"The translation was begun in the spring of 1607; and the completion of it occupied almost three years. When the whole was finished, and three

* According to Neal, in his history of the Puritans, the number of those, who survived, and who were actually employed in the work, was forty-seven.

copies of it were sent to London, one from Cambridge, a second from Oxford, and a third from Westminster, two were chosen from the joint companies, which had assembled at those places, to review and polish it. The two from Cambridge companies were Mr. John Bois, fellow of St. John's College, and Mr. Andrew Downes, professor of Greek. These daily met their fellow-laborers in Stationer's hall, London; where, in nine months they completed their task."—"The whole was, at last, reviewed by Bilson, bishop of Winchester, and Dr. Myles Smith, afterwards bishop of Gloucester, who prefixed arguments to the several books; and the latter was ordered to write the preface. This edition of the Bible, with the preface and a dedication to the king, was first published in London, in the year 1611; and is commonly called 'King James' Bible."